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# ARTICLE

## **The Elementary Classroom: A Key Dimension of a Child's Democratic World**

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### **A human conversation**

School has been in session for a month; the ten- and eleven-year-old students are in the middle of a class meeting. The issue is whether or not to have a class pet, a decision that these students invariably choose to take on each new school year. Some students are already imagining a gerbil inhabiting a cage in the corner. However, as the class votes on a proposal to have a pet, one student casts a dissenting vote, not a vote of slight disapproval, but a vote of “zero,” indicating his vehement opposition to the proposal. A collective groan of disbelief and disappointment fills the room as visions of a gerbil fade. Some class members begin to angrily interrogate the outlier, for he, while holding only one vote, given the consensus model used in this room, has the power to stand in the way of the group's decision.

The teacher steps in. She draws an imaginary line across the room and invites all students to take positions indicating their willingness to have a class pet. One wall represents the “must have” contingent, the other the “can't abide the idea” contingent, with more moderate positions ranging across the middle. The dissenting student has his back literally against the wall as he continues his stubborn refrain of “No, I won't.” The teacher calls his attention to the physical continuum of his classmates' perspectives on the issue. She explains that the class consensus model gives him the “power” to stand in the way of the wishes of the rest of the class, but it comes with a commensurate responsibility to articulate his objections in order to help the class meet his needs.

Realization spreads across his face: His decision to take a stand does not end with his closed-fisted vote. He balks at explaining. He is accustomed to using his finely honed verbal skills to question or to confront, not to clarify. However, with coaching, he begins to speak in a quiet voice. The rest of the class, still standing at their places on the class pet continuum, can sense the change in atmosphere, and they listen attentively. “You may not know that I am a vegetarian,” he begins. He goes on to describe his family's beliefs regarding eating meat. Next, he talks about animal rights issues and how abhorrent he finds the idea of confining an animal to life in a cage. As he speaks, one by one, the rest of class moves toward him, until all of them are clustered on his side of the room. The teacher wipes tears from her eyes, the proposal is rescinded, and the group moves on to other business.

### **Classrooms as democratic worlds**

This is an example of the power of class meetings in the democratic world of an elementary classroom. Classrooms are “public” places where children from diverse cultural, economic, and religious backgrounds meet. The “public” in our democratic society is “...one living body that has no single soul or being - it is not the “State” (Brann, 1979, p. 11). As such, the success of our political system, and by extension, our very culture, depends upon a well-informed citizenry capable of exercising its democratic responsibilities. We expect each person to make a meaningful contribution to this living body. A classroom is a step away from family, toward independence, into the larger society, in which students must learn to negotiate the increasingly complex world of competing interests (Parker, 2005). As educators, our long-term goal is to help our students gain the skills and experience required to become effective citizens of the adult world.

And yet, some people ask why we bother with this topic at all. In the educational climate today of high-stakes testing and increasing demands to improve academic achievement, why should a teacher devote precious class time to the democratic life of classrooms? A democracy depends upon a well-educated and informed citizenry, and society expects schools to perform this function. Dewey maintained the importance of schools as places in which future members of society must experience favorable "...conditions of the social spirit..." (Dewey, 1900, p. 15). John Goodlad argues that we have a moral imperative to do so, "...the skills, disposition, and habits of intellect necessary for democratic citizenship have to be developed somewhere. People are not born with them" (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley & Goodlad, 2004, p. 28). What are these skills, dispositions and necessary habits of intellect, and how can we develop them in our students?

### **What does a citizen in a democratic society need to learn?**

While there are many ways to approach this task, I focus on three aspects of student life: reading skills, communication skills and valuing community and diversity. Reading is arguably the most important skill our students need to master. However, in order to carry out their own governance, democratic citizens must possess an in-depth, complex literacy that includes such skills as critical inquiry, how to ask questions, how to evaluate arguments and data, how to view issues from different perspectives, and how to read between the lines (Goodlad, et al.).

Communication skills are another essential component to effective education for participants in a democracy. In a swiftly changing world with increasing global connections, citizens must be able to engage in thoughtful deliberation (Parker, 2005), which requires speaking with a purpose, asking questions to clarify, listening actively, and being reflective.

The decisions we make in the public arena are, in essence, decisions we make for everyone. Therefore, citizens in a democracy must learn that what they do affects others (Hepburn, 1983). They must also learn that we are not all alike, and that our needs vary. This is critical in a country founded on the conflicting values (to name but a few) of public and private, and group and individual (Brann, 1979). The tensions between majority and minority demands are ever present. Linda Christensen writes about her experience with teaching literacy in a diverse, urban high school class, where "... rising up is a metaphor for students imagining a different kind of society" (2000, p. viii.). (For more ideas about diversity as an underlying concept in our democratic society, I recommend *Democracy and Diversity: Principles and Concepts for Educating Citizens in a Global Age* (Banks, et al., 2005).)

### **Developing democratic processes: My journey thus far**

So how do I fulfill my role as an educator for democracy, and implement my plans for reading, communicating and valuing community and diversity? My classroom democratic process is a dynamic one, compiled from a variety of sources.

### **Nurturing each child**

I began with the realization that, in order to be a contributing member of our classroom democracy, each student needs to feel valued and included. This proved challenging for students with behavior issues that got in the way of effective participation. I discovered Howard Glasser's and Jennifer Easley's book (and Glasser's training workshop) *The Nurtured Heart Approach: Transforming the Difficult Child* (Glasser & Easley, 1998). This gave me effective tools to help bring increased self-esteem and confidence to my more troubled students. (I recommend Glasser's new book, *The Inner*

*Wealth Initiative: The Nurtured Heart Approach for Educators [Grove, Glasser & Block, 2007].)*

While this is very effective at helping students recognize successful behaviors, and it can be used with an entire class, it does not foster democratic principles in and of itself. It does teach students the responsibility each of them has for creating a respectful classroom community. It provides the requisite safe space in which all of us can have the conversations necessary to further our democratic process.

### **Communicating to equalize power**

Next, I learned that when students felt that I was compelling them to obey me, they often saw only two choices: submit or rebel. I wanted to help my students choose cooperation instead. William Glasser describes students' need for power as one of five basic human needs, and the one to which students have the least access (Glasser, 1986, p. 27). He believes that "...if students do not feel that they have any power in their academic classes, they will not work in school." He envisions teachers as "modern managers," willing to share power in order to reap the rewards of students willing to work harder. To do this, I had to find a way to reduce my own "power." I decided to learn more about Non-Violent Communication (NVC) (Rosenberg, 2003), so I attended a lecture and a few practice classes. While I do not claim to be NVC trained or certified, my attempts to use NVC language and intention has proven helpful. Again, this is not a democratic process technique as much as it is a way to craft meaningful dialogue in class and to encourage student voice. Voice is a critical component of citizenship in a democratic society. Students need frequent, authentic opportunities to practice exercising their voices and their power in appropriate ways. I model speaking with an attention to words and a communication style that we can all use to create a non-judgmental environment in which thoughtful deliberation can take place.

### **Inviting students to lead themselves: Class meetings**

As another way to empower my students, I decided to expand my use of class meetings. I began to see that the day-to-day problems that arise from the social fabric of classroom life provided a wealth of opportunities to practice, model and participate in democratic process: conflict as fodder for deliberation (Gerzon, 1997; Parker, 2005). I moved from a forum for making announcements, and for bringing up problems for the teacher to solve, to a public space in which students take responsibility for addressing their own issues and finding their own solutions. The opening true story about class pets is an excellent example. Now my students own the agenda; I am but another member of the class, with one vote, just as each of them has. Some other problems my class has tackled include various forms of "whether or not to have...." (a hot drink stand, pillows in class, show and tell, free choice seating), the purpose and value of homework, whether or not to produce the school yearbook, and "how to resolve issues with..." lockers, playground games, and other teachers, for instance.

Our decisions are made based on a consensus model. I teach my students that in a community governed by simple majority rule, at any point in time, we could have almost half the class dissatisfied with a decision. I ask them to consider how it would feel to be a dissenting voter: Your well considered opinion, in our nurturing, egalitarian "society," counts for nothing. Children understand, based on prior experience in their lives, that this is inherently unfair, and they willingly take on the challenge of striving for consensus.

We vote using a zero-to-five scale. A zero means absolutely not, a five means unqualified approval, and a three is neutral; anything less than a three is a "nay" vote. This range of choices allows both the meeting leader, and the group as a whole, to quickly and visually gauge the level of group support for a proposal. This information helps everyone plan an approach to reaching a consensus decision. Students who vote 0, 1 or 2 must clearly explain their objections in order to allow the class to try to

adjust the proposal at hand to better meet their needs. At the beginning of the school year, I explicitly model meeting management techniques with the expectation that all students will have a turn at leadership before the year is over. Each meeting ends with a de-briefing session in which the leader describes what the experience was like and class members give the leader specific feedback about his/her performance.

I developed my form of class meetings based on my own life experience with ineffectual meetings and on my goals for student governance. While most of the reference material I have found on the topic tends to be too teacher-driven for my liking, I have recently discovered, and recommend, Donna Styles' book, *Class Meetings: Building Leadership, Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Skills in the Respectful Classroom* (Styles, 2001).

### **Providing opportunities for building understanding together: Socratic Seminars**

I learned about Socratic Seminars (Strong, 1996) through the League of Small Democratic Schools (referenced later). The seminar is a teaching strategy that focuses on delving deeply into selected text and emphasizes the importance of each seminar member's contribution to help the group create meaning. The teacher leads students in pre-seminar study of the text and related concepts, which leads up to the seminar discussion. The students sit in a circle and engage in thoughtful deliberation, supporting their ideas with examples from the text, and demonstrating respectful listening and communicating behaviors.

I was initially interested in Socratic Seminars as a way to help struggling readers create meaning from complex text. As a result of my experience using them, however, I have discovered they have many applications. I have used them to teach a variety of social studies concepts, to delve into literature, and to build a common understanding based upon students' prior knowledge. The Socratic Seminar has proved to be a powerful technique to improve my own questioning skills, to develop an appreciation for diversity in my class, to foster student responsibility and initiative, and to teach other important skills like critical thinking and sensitivity for others.

While most people relegate this intimidating-sounding strategy to high school and college courses, I have found them to be effective with my intermediate level students. A review of Strong's book, *The Habit of Thought*, in The National Teaching & Learning Forum (NTLF), sums up Strong's call to "the most noble stance any teacher can take with students, that of 'an honest, open, inquiring mind'" (Rhem, 2004). (The NTLF's Appendix A describes application of Strong's assessment rubric to a fourth-grade student [NTLF, 2004].) Related resources I have found helpful include the Junior Great Books Shared Inquiry format (information available online and in their Junior Great Book Teacher's Guides (Great Books Foundation, 2007); the Paideia Seminar (National Paideia Center, 2003); Parker's *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life* (especially Chapter 5, "Can We Talk?" and Chapter 7, "Learning to Lead Discussions, Parker, 2003); and publications from the Foundation for Critical Thinking (Elder, 2005; Paul, Binker & Kreklau, 1990).

The Socratic Seminar addresses all three of my targeted democratic skills and behaviors: Goodlad's complex literacy, Parker's thoughtful deliberation, and the regard for community and diversity that we all recognize as crucial.

### **Listening to what my students say**

I can tell that students enjoy taking part in our seminars and class meetings. In meetings, they create their own agendas, beg for additional chances to lead and use the meetings to solve problems. I want to know what they think about our class meetings. So I periodically ask them what they consider to be

the most important things they have learned as a result of their participation in the process. Some of their thoughts include the following:

Some people don't agree with me.

It's not about me or you, it's about everybody.

Class meetings have taught me about being a group and being a leader.

I like having a choice about what happens.

Leading people is fun and frustrating.

I learned that when I lead I shouldn't get too involved in the conversation.

Class meeting is good because it teaches consensus.

It lets us make decisions about the class.

I learned how to lead a group to a decision.

I learned not to ramble on and to let other people talk.

It's not always what the person wants. You need to go to the middle and "stretch."

I listen better now, and it's fun because I have a voice.

A lot of people are willing to "flex."

I have learned to listen and to respect.

I have learned to speak up and add an idea to the meeting.

Children are, by virtue of their developmental stage in life, largely self-centered. Therefore, I consider the feedback above to be profound. It shows that, despite their own self-interest, students can be reflective about their own experiences, about the experiences of others, and about the needs of the larger group.

I have also asked students about which they think is better, consensus or majority rule. They have all had experience with majority rule in other parts of their lives, and most have strong opinions about it. Almost unanimously, they say that consensus is better than majority rule:

It doesn't leave the other people who didn't vote for it feeling bad.

Everybody has a say and everybody is happy.

When you use majority rule, it feels like nobody cares what I want.

Everyone can have a chance to agree.

We can all work it out together.

It has worked out well so far and someone can stop it (*the decision*).

You do it so no one is grumbling.

Majority rule does not fit everybody's needs.

Majority rule isn't fair. Usually half the people aren't happy with the decision.

Nobody feels like he was left out.

Everybody's opinion counts.

An especially insightful student wrote: "I think majority rule is sometimes the best, like if you're just watching a movie and one person doesn't want to, then it's the best. But if it's something serious, it's not."

Near the end of one school year, a student had an "Ah ha!" moment and said, "Now I know why we have a representative form of government! Consensus takes too long for everyone in our country to choose a president. But in our class it makes better decisions." Despite the fact that consensus is messy and inefficient, my students realize that it results in decisions everyone can support. (In times of gridlock and absolute frustration, someone invariably floats the suggestion, "Let's just vote with majority rule, it's easier!" The comeback is always some form of, "But that's a cop out!")

One of the most important, and scary, things I have learned using class meetings is that I have to be open to going where the class process leads. My students trust that my willingness to turn the agenda and discussion over to them is genuine, and they truly make it their own. The conflicts that arise during our conversations are often unanticipated and can result in powerful displays of emotion. Yet it is this same emotional connection that creates the sense of community and trust that allows us to do the work we do.

### **Learning from colleagues and professional development**

In 2004, my school joined The League of Small Democratic Schools (LSDS). (For more information about the League, go to the website for The Institute of Educational Inquiry [2007], and click on "Programs.") This connection began as a fuzzy relationship, on my part, since I did not really understand what it meant to be a "democratic" school or, by extension, a "democratic" teacher. However, during our four-year relationship with the League, I have been fortunate to attend a variety of meetings and conferences that have helped me build a deeper understanding of my role in teaching future citizens of our democracy. One valuable component of LSDS membership has been its requirement for a community partner, and I have appreciated my interaction with Western Washington University's Center for Educational Pluralism. This relationship has afforded, among other things, numerous opportunities for professional development in the areas of diversity and the legal and political realities of today's educational environment.

### **Developing effective leaders: It's all about creating a "human conversation"**

A democratic society depends upon citizens who are both willing and able to assume the responsibility of governance. Most adults do not have the skills necessary to lead meetings effectively: managing the agenda, the time, the issues and the personalities involved. Many of them do not know how to participate respectfully: listening to others rather than just waiting for their turn to talk, asking questions to clarify information, and encouraging less assertive members to contribute, since any one person's suggestion could be the solution all have been seeking. For example, a website for practicing

lawyers describes most meetings as “rambling, inefficient time wasters” (Practice Development Counsel, 2007). The offered training claims to teach (among other things) the need to encourage participation by others and the need to create an environment conducive to collaboration. Students can and do learn these skills in a classroom that affords appropriate opportunities, in my class through Socratic Seminars and class meetings.

I have come to realize that the most important thing I can do to prepare students for their lives as adults in our shared democratic world is to help them talk with, and listen to, each other. I invite students to take part in Goodlad's “human conversation” (Goodlad, et al., p. 30). He argues that participation in the human conversation is too often lacking in schools, and yet it is the heart of essential preparation for citizenship. Parker describes this conversation as “competent public talk.” His view includes thoughtful deliberation (as opposed to “blather”) about social and academic issues, with an emphasis on the teacher's role to model this process (2003 and 2005).

I try to think of the skills and dispositions for citizenship as an integral part of my everyday teaching, rather than something I plan to teach once a week in a Social Studies class. Talking about how democracy works is not the same as experiencing democracy in action. The values we want to instill in students are best acquired through experience; therefore “... students must daily observe democratic practices and adult models who adhere to the values of justice equity, freedom, responsibility, and participation.” (Hepburn, 1983, p. vii). Further, I know that democratic dispositions must be developed within a context of issues and conversations that are relevant to my students.

## Planning my next steps

Can I really make a difference? I believe so. I have many resources to help guide me. Parker's recommendations for action “toward enlightened political engagement,” *inside schools*, are a possible roadmap (2003, p. 52-53). I am already tackling three of these recommendations: infusing the curriculum with decision-making opportunities, affording students opportunities to deliberate actual classroom and school problems, and creating a caring social environment at school. I plan to urge my school to implement his fourth recommendation regarding high-quality civics courses (and the “school problems” portion of the second recommendation, above) in the near future.

I want my students to have Goodlad's “skills, dispositions and habits of intellect” to negotiate the complex democratic world of tomorrow. For me, these include the ability to read, write, and calculate as well as knowing how to passionately articulate a position, listen with curiosity and an open mind, consider a proposal critically, craft compromises, and care about the needs of others. Am I there yet? No. I am growing, my practice is constantly evolving, and yet many challenges remain. Since much of my process is verbal, which benefits students with oral language strengths, I still find it difficult to get quiet students to open up and reluctant writers to put pencil to paper. Do I have time to do all of the things I want to do during my teaching day? Never! Thus, just as I teach writing during science, I strive to find ways to infuse all I do with as much democratic process as I can. Do my students get along perfectly? Of course they don't; but when differences arise, rather than administering my own solutions, I encourage students to share their opinions and beliefs and to listen and learn about each other with a goal of finding common ground.

I will continue to look for ways to improve my ability to create a democratic classroom, remembering that “...the effort of the single teacher is the ultimate resort of excellence in education. After all, in the matter of the spirit even a vanishingly small effect has to none a ratio of infinity” (Brann, 1979, p. 5). My goal with students is that, together, we can maintain “... an open-ended dialogue that will never reach the last word” (Ayers, 2004, p. 158): a human conversation.



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